### Frequently Asked Questions September 2013

Final Rule to Increase Quotas for Red Snapper in the Gulf of Mexico and Re-open the Recreational Season for 2013

#### What does the rule do?

- The rule increases the total allowable catch for the red snapper component of the reef fish fishery from 8.46 million pounds (mp) to 11.0 mp. The commercial and recreational sector quotas are 5.61 mp and 5.39 mp, respectively.
- The rule also re-opens the recreational season at 12:01 a.m., local time, October 1, 2013, closes at 12:01 a.m., local time, October 15, 2013.

#### Why can the quotas be increased?

- A recent assessment for red snapper showed the population can support higher catches. The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council's (Council) Scientific and Statistic Committee determined the acceptable biological catch could be increased to 13.5 mp for 2013, the highest level since 1996.
- The acceptable biological catch is the scientific calculation of the sustainable harvest level for a species. The Council must set the allowable catch at or below the acceptable biological catch level
- The acceptable biological catch was increased for 2013 because recent large year classes of fish have attained harvestable size.

#### Why was the allowable catch set at 11 mp and not 13.5 mp?

- The assessment showed that the number of fish reaching harvestable size in 2014 and 2015 will be less. Therefore, the acceptable biological catches and the quotas for those years would need to be lower if the 2013 quota is set too high.
- During public testimony at Council meetings, a majority of stakeholders supported setting management measures that would bring stability to both the commercial and recreational sectors.
- The Council agreed with stakeholders that a constant catch strategy would provide the greatest economic benefit over the next 3 years, and determined that by foregoing some catch in 2013, higher allowable catches could be set for 2014 and 2015.
- The Council was told that red snapper recreational landings from the Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) exceeded the new quota. How can NOAA Fisheries re-open the recreational season?
- Preliminary catch estimates produced by MRIP for the June 2013 season are unexpectedly
  high relative to previous years, largely because they indicate a higher proportion of fishing
  effort is occurring in federal waters relative to past years.
- New MRIP sampling methods implemented in March 2013 provide much better coverage than in previous years. The previous survey design may have missed trips that returned to the dock late in the day, which possibly affected the preliminary red snapper landings estimates.

- At this time, we do not know to what degree the preliminary red snapper estimates are
  influenced by the new survey design and the new estimates may not be directly comparable
  to the 2013 catch quota, which is based on historical catch estimates using the prior
  methodology.
- For that reason, scientists advised NOAA Fisheries that the catch estimates originally used to set the June season are the best scientific information available.
- Those estimates indicate the recreational sector still has quota available for an October season.

#### Why was the re-opening of the recreational season changed from 21 days to 14 days?

- NOAA Fisheries has determined the best available science on which to base a decision on the length of the fall season is the analysis projecting the number of days available for a supplemental season with the increase in the recreational quota.
- Projections are based on daily catch rates and average size of red snapper. Available data show a small increase in fishing effort Gulf-wide, no significant changes in catch rates (landings per day), and an average size of red snapper for 2013 consistent with the original projections.
- The 21 days originally projected for the supplemental season were based on assuming catch rates during a fall season would be only half of the summer season catch rates.
- It would not be realistic to assume fall catch rates will be the same as in the summer, due to children being in school, the possibility of inclement weather, and other recreational opportunities available to the public, such as hunting and football.
- Given questions about the new data, the past performance of the fishery, the increase in fishing effort in June, and an indication that effort during the fall may be greater than originally anticipated, NOAA Fisheries assumed catch rates for fall to be mid-way between the original projections and full summer catch rates; in other words 75 percent of summer catch rates.
- Based on the increase in the recreational quota implemented by this final rule and the analysis of the fall catch rates, NMFS has determined that the recreational sector may reopen for an additional 14 days.

# Why did the Council choose to have the supplemental recreational season on continuous days and not on weekends only?

- Although a weekend-only season would extend the fishing period over a longer time, the actual number of days open would be less because effort is higher on weekends.
- More fishing effort is expended over weekends because people work or are in school during weekdays.
- A continuous season also provides opportunity for people who fish on week days, as well as those that fish on weekends.

## When will commercial individual fishing quota (IFQ) shareholders receive their additional allocation?

- The increase in quota will be distributed to IFQ shareholders on or shortly after October 1.
- The additional quota will be distributed based on each participant's share holdings.
- IFO participants have until the end of the year to use the additional allocation.

#### What other red snapper regulations are fishery managers considering?

- The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council is exploring a number of alternative management options, including:
  - A regional recreational management strategy that would delegate some aspects of decision making to the Gulf coast states to provide greater flexibility at the local level while still meeting overall conservation objectives;
  - o Reallocating all or some portion of the total allowable catch between the commercial and recreational sectors (the current allocation is 51% commercial and 49% recreational);
  - o An intersector trading program; and
  - o Separate management for private anglers and for-hire vessels.

#### Where can I find more information on the red snapper fishery?

• For more information on *Red Snapper*, *Past, Present and Future*, please visit <a href="http://sero.nmfs.noaa.gov/sustainable\_fisheries/gulf\_fisheries/red\_snapper/index.html">http://sero.nmfs.noaa.gov/sustainable\_fisheries/gulf\_fisheries/red\_snapper/index.html</a>.